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RUEHBS/AMEMBASSY BRUSSELS 3091
RUEHLI/AMEMBASSY LISBON 1189
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON 3398
RUEHMD/AMEMBASSY MADRID 5789
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 RABAT 001504

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [PREL](#) [MO](#)

SUBJECT: MOROCCAN ELECTIONS: MORE TRANSPARENT BUT A SOUR
AFTERTASTE FROM LOW TURNOUT AND CHARGES OF MALFEASANCE

REF: A. RABAT 1429

[B](#). RABAT 1426

[C](#). RABAT 1408 AND PREVIOUS

Classified by Ambassador Thomas Riley for reasons 1.4 (b) and
(d).

Summary

[1](#). (C) As the dust settles after Morocco's 2007
Parliamentary elections, we are hearing increasing
complaints, despite the government's continued openness after
polls hailed internationally for their unprecedented
transparency. Two factors are leaving a sour aftertaste.
First, the low participation rate in the September 7 polls,
officially set at 37 percent, along with an invalid ballot
rate of 19 percent. These are being cited as evidence of
profound public alienation from the political system.
Second, we are hearing multiple complaints alleging numerous,
systemic irregularities. On top of its public charges of
opposition vote buying, a senior PJD leader added privately
to us claims of official misbehavior in the elections.
Meanwhile, the coalition of domestic civil society observers
have released a scathing report - in stark contrast to the
initial findings of the international observer mission and
the Royal Human Rights Council.

[2](#). (C) At the same time, however, the government's truly
unprecedented transparency continues. On September 15, the
government, correcting a shortcoming from the last elections,
released formal detailed vote counts, by district. We have
also heard reports that judicial authorities are
investigating up to 40 newly elected members of parliament
for electoral malfeasance could offset these process
complaints and in the process shake up the political
landscape. Some believe the GOM's electoral transparency
this year will pay off in higher participation rates in the
future. Ultimately, constitutional reform leading to a
stronger parliament will be necessary to build public
confidence in the system. End summary.

They Threw an Election, but Nobody Came

[3](#). (C) The Ministry of Interior's downward revision of
participation to 37 percent of registered voters was a
stunning admission by the GOM. The low turnout represented a
significant setback both for the government and for the King
personally, who had regularly and vigorously urged his

subjects to vote. The "silent majority" of Moroccans who opted not to vote, along with the 19 percent of voters who turned in invalid ballots (exceeding the percentage who voted for any single party), have had a more fundamental impact than those who did vote by calling into question the broader legitimacy of the system. (Note: Although we don't have a precise breakdown, some of these rejected voters are the result of voter error or confusion. However, based on numerous interviews and discussions, we believe that the vast majority of these are in fact blank ballots, in some cases with obscenities penned in, or with the entire ballot "x'ed" out. End note.)

¶4. (C) Unlike many other countries with voter turnout issues, Morocco's absentee voters appear to have been drawn as much from the middle and upper classes as from the lower classes. Business contacts in Casablanca told us that they did not vote in this election and do not plan to vote in the next because they see no point and have no faith in the process. The question of how to define transparent elections is also coming into play. The fact that the Government of Morocco is widely credited with being neutral in the process may not indicate transparent elections if indeed other players subverted the process as has been claimed.

¶5. (C) Mohammed Ben Hammou (protect), President of the Moroccan Center for Strategic Studies, told us the low turnout, and the elections in general, were bad news for Morocco. "It has now been clearly demonstrated that the people are alienated from the political system," he asserted. Youth in particular, who represent Morocco's future, have no confidence in Morocco's leaders, he emphasized, warning that if left unaddressed, this trend would destabilize the country

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within a decade.

¶6. On Saturday, however, the government, correcting a shortcoming from the last elections, released detailed formal vote counts, by district. This was only a day after the specialized international observation focused on counting, the Berlin-based DRI, issued a report calling for such release. The release had to have been planned before, given its very clear presentation on the Interior Ministry website: www.elections2007.ma, which we recommend for those interested in details. The site does not at this time carry votes by voting precinct, which would be a further and even more decisive element of transparency.

Low Turnout: All Fingers Point to the Parties

¶7. (C) Interestingly, MOI statistics show that 85 percent of eligible voters collected their voter registration cards between their issuance in May and Election Day September 7. The difference between intent to vote as expressed by the card retrieval rate and the actual voting rate may be an indication that the King's and government's participation campaign was initially successful in peaking interest in the electoral process. The overwhelming consensus among Embassy contacts, supported by academic research, is that Morocco's political parties enjoy very low public confidence. The parties' inability to present a persuasive, coherent vision of change and progress may have subsequently led an already disillusioned electorate to withdraw from further participation (reftels). Almost all interlocutors have told us that the burden of moving national political reform forward in a parliamentary context now falls on the parties.

Election Day was Clean - but Were the Elections?

¶8. (C) In the days following the September 7 polls, there was general consensus that the GOM's management of the

balloting and counting process was transparent and efficient.

However, the European Union-funded (EU) domestic observer consortium issued on September 12 a scathing statement that stood in sharp contrast to the initial findings of the (MEPI funded) International Observer Mission and the Royal Human Rights Commission (CCDH) (ref A). The domestic observers charged that "the integrity of the elections was compromised by pressure exerted on large sectors of the electorate, in particular by the illicit use of money, merchandise and promises." The report went a further step in denunciation by accusing local government officials of complicity in fraud in various races around the country, charging that they turned a blind eye to the use of local public transport vehicles to move voters en masse, overlooking campaign activity on election day, discrepancies between voting card issuance and voter list data, and process violations during the count.

¶9. (C) Similarly, the Islamist PJD also cried foul after it fell well short of expectations in the seat count even as it won the popular vote. "We came in second, corruption came in first," was the much-circulated sound-byte from deputy party leader Lahcen Daoudi. Another party spokesman, appearing on Moroccan TV complained of "negative neutrality" on the part of the authorities, who were all too willing to overlook credible allegations of vote buying and suppression in local races, he charged. In a September 18 meeting, Daoudi told us that the use of money to buy or suppress votes had been greater on September 7 than in any previous election. In his own district, Fes-North, he charged that his chief competitor, the Istiqlali mayor Hamid Chabat, had deployed thugs near polling stations to discourage voters with an Islamist appearance. Daoudi nonetheless won one of the four seats in the district, but maintained that PJD could have taken at least one more seat if not for "dirty tricks" from the competition.

¶10. (C) Many sources have offered us anecdotes about vote suppression, which may have exceeded the practice of actual vote buying, and would also obviously aggravate the low turnout rate. In various races around the country, contacts tell us, individual campaigns and local party officials would "rent" the i.d.'s and voting cards of voters presumed likely to vote for an opponent. In exchange for a nominal fee of anywhere between DH 20 and DH 200 (USD 2.40 - USD 20.40), a

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voter would turn over his/her voter card and i.d., for retrieval after election day. Absent either of these documents, citizens would not be able to vote, leaving a majority of "reliable" voters for a given candidate to turn in their ballots. One factor which may have contributed to the low turnout rate was the government pressure against vote buying, on which the Embassy has extensively reported. Voters whose only reason to go to the polls was the reward at the end may have been ready to do so, but with no money decided it wasn't worth the effort.

The Other Shoe May Still Drop

¶11. (C) At least some of those complaining they were cheated out of their seats by vote buying and other malfeasance may still be vindicated. The GOM has confirmed that judicial authorities are investigating 40 elected MPs for electoral malfeasance. This news carries significant weight in light of the precedent set by the GOM in September 2006, when 15 elected to the Upper House were removed from their seats for malfeasance, with 8 sentenced to jail. It is too early to predict whether the 40 investigations cited by the GOM will lead to significant turnovers, and new by-elections, but the potential exists for a further makeover of the parliament's composition by party.

Epilogue: A Credibility Lag?

¶12. (C) Notwithstanding the low turnout and the charges of local-level malfeasance, the Government of Morocco (GOM) went to unprecedented lengths to ensure that information about voting was available quickly and was widely disseminated. Preliminary results were announced the evening of September 7 and, as more data became available through counting, the MOI revised its participation figures from 41 percent to 37 percent (as compared to 52 percent in 2002), showing that it was willing to impart information that could be seen as embarrassing to a government and monarchy that staked their reputations on a high participation.

¶13. (C) The international observer contingent, and an apparent majority of Moroccan analysts and political observers give the government high marks for its election operation, saying that these were the first "real elections." Journalist Kamal Mountassir, who was pessimistic about turnout and vote buying in pre-election conversations, said on September 14 that the GOM may be a victim of "credibility lag" in which people are so accustomed to government meddling and ineptitude that they may not yet be willing to give the MOI credit for what well this time around. Mountassir said that it will take at least one and maybe two more elections before most Moroccans will concede governmental fairness.

Comment

¶14. (C) The lack of popular faith in the parliament, and political parties' seeming inability to move beyond self-interest toward a true model of constituent service and representation (reftels) represent fundamental obstacles to substantive democratic reform in Morocco. We assess that the lack of public trust in the parliament is rooted not only in the political parties' ineptitude but in the public realization that parliament is a toothless institution, relegated by the constitution to a marginal and superficial role in policy making, with the Palace retaining all the trump cards. Only constitutional reform devolving real authority from the Palace to the parliament seems to us likely to change the current equation. So far we are hearing little from the parties, or in the broader public discourse, on the subject. End comment.

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